

The San Diego Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists 2007 Awards

1st Place Award: Daily Newspaper Arts and Entertainment Writing

Joanna Smiley Today's Local News Weapons of Mass Expression Comment: Smiley spins a hopeful yet sad and ironic tale of Marine rappers caught up in the Iraq War, traumatized by the conflict, but yet aiming for a break in the music industry and getting their crack performing at their military base. Very interesting and nice piece.



Kymani White, front row from left, Sgt. Gabriel DeJesus and Naval Petty Officer 3rd Class Terrance Hampton are members of the rap groups Emcee Technique and West Bound. The groups performed June 29 at Camp Pendleton. Peter Nagainis

Weapons of mass expression



Cpl. Brian "Noyz" Thomas, a rapper with the group Southunoyz, expresses himself and his combat experiences through rap music.

Marine group raps about 'what you don't see in the news'

By Joanna Smiley | joanna@tlnnews.net

"Mama keep askin' me 'Baby, what's wrong?' All I can say is 'Baby I wanna go home. I'm one man and I'm in a war. But I don't know what I'm dying for. Left, left, left, right, left"
— "Rules of Engagement," Southunoyz

Lights out. Curtains up. Boom, boom, boom, the bass ricocheted as Cpl. Brian Thomas burst on stage in a whirlwind of raw emotion. U.S. Marine by day, "Noyz" by night, Thomas' most powerful weapon isn't a machine gun — it's a microphone. Thomas performed June 29 at Camp Pendleton's first rap show in the South Mesa Club, a dimly lit lounge not far from the main gate. Oceanside rappers including Emcee Technique, Lil' Uno, West Bound, DJ Focus and four dancers, who graduated last month from an Oceanside high school, also performed. The show attracted a crowd of about 50 people, a small number because of the difficulty recruiting civilians. "We do a show the same, whether it's 40,000 or four fans," Thomas said. Lawrence F. Sangis, manager at the South Mesa Club, was still pleased with the turnout. "It's nice to see Marines advancing in interests that they have and sharing their talents with the base," he said. Naval Petty Officer 3rd Class Ter-

rance Hampton, of the rap group West Bound, had slept only two hours the previous night.

"I'm blessed," he said. "I'm just happy we got a chance to do something on base for the Marines, for everybody."

The first thing group members will tell you is that Southunoyz is more of a movement than a band. All four members met while serving in Iraq in 2002; all four have combat awards to show for it.

Dominique "Yung Sip" Duncan, 23, of Southunoyz, is now honorably discharged, but was in his second deployment when they started recording.

"That's what I don't miss about the Marine Corps," he said with a sigh.

Southunoyz began rapping in their barracks, writing rhymes and thoughts down on "anything we could get our hands on," said Thomas.

Their sound and CD "The Mason Dixon Movement" combines gritty lyrics with a lighter side, a slice of Southern life (the members are from Texas, Georgia, Mississippi and Louisiana).

On April 1, 2005, Southunoyz had its biggest career break. The band was invited to perform in front of 50,000 Marines, sailors and military families at Camp Pendleton's Rockin' the Corps concert.

They shared the stage with Destiny's Child, Kiss, Ted Nugent, Jah Rule and Godsmack.

"We're really humble," said Thomas. "Even if we made millions we'd be humble about it. Being in combat we've seen it all; that takes away a lot of the excitement."

Thomas performed combat operations in Iraq from 2003-04. He was stationed in Mahmoudiya, Iraq. He recalls a particularly "dark day" when he was the one who had to report the death of

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a "great" Marine, killed by an improvised explosive device.

"I've got post traumatic stress disorder," the burly Marine said as he started to choke up.

"Rap music is healing for me," he said. "You get a chance to say things and put things into words that normally people wouldn't understand."

"Rules of Engagement," an original beat created on an Apple Power Mac G4, is a song about the group's "unromanticized" experiences in combat.

The lyrics in chorus two, second verse, read: "Get scarred and bullet-holed daily, I'm thinking the next war might be wit' Haiti, cause nights I cried, played cards wit' friends, the next day they lost they lives (why)?"

The third verse reads: "Mister Hussein this ain't no game. Apply remedial action like tap, rack, bang (shot), Bodies getting wet and it ain't by rain, by tha time I get home I'm half past insane."

"Our eyes are our windows," Thomas said. "There's nothing glorious. War is death and destruction, we portray what we see. We try to get people to understand not the politics, ... the truth. What you don't see in the news."

Southunoyz was recently offered a record deal by a "pro-military" rep from Universal Music Group, according to Thomas, but the group is "back at the bottom again" because the Marines in the group (excluding Duncan) will be serving in the military until 2009.

"We're shopping around and hoping someone can accommodate us," he said. "We want to serve our country and do music."

"Even if you don't believe in the war or the politics, you believe in the mission, in taking care of each other. Somebody's got to do it, right?"

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